

THE GRAEFF PRIZE ESSAY: 1868.

A N E S S A Y

ON

Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice,

BY

PRESTON K. ERDMAN,

OF THE CLASS OF '68.

PENNSYLVANIA COLLEGE.

GETTYSBURG:

PRINTED AT THE "STAR AND SENTINEL" OFFICE,
1868.



Award of Committee.

GETTYSBURG, JULY 28TH, 1868.

PROF. EDSALL FERRIER,


Dear Sir :—

The Essays on "The Merchant of Venice," which you submitted to us for examination, all evince literary taste and careful treatment of the subject, and are of a high order of merit; but the one subscribed "Coriolanus" is, in our judgment, entitled to the "Graeff Prize."

D. McCONAUGHY,

D. A. BUEHLER,

Committee.



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Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice.

THE very mention of our theme brings up before us, like a magic utterance, a strange spectacle : crumbling structures, around whose mouldering tops linger the memories of former greatness, "empty halls, thin streets," whose hollow sounds are like the knell of a great funeral, and massive ruins on whose every face may be seen the visage of fading glory. Venice is a world of interest. Queen of the Adriatic, "throned on her hundred isles," she tells of trembling states, subjugated empires ; of her evangelist's fantastic sanctuary, the gorgeous palace of the Doges, and the far-famed Rialto ; of her free government, her winged lion and bronzed horses ; the freighted vessels laboring into her princely harbor ; her rich favors from nature, and all that exalts one state far above the rest. She saw surrounding states rise, flourish, agonize, dissolve,—herself in safety. While proud Rome went through all the last stages of the awful drama of the fate of nations, she looked serenely on. Thirteen hundred years rolled by her unmoved, and she stood "the last surviving witness of antiquity, the

common link between two periods of civilization." The accumulated wealth of her citizens brought with it luxury. The East and the West brought their costliest merchandise for her ornaments ; her streets re-echoed with music and merriment, and Venice was

"The pleasant place of all festivity,
The revel of the earth, the masque of Italy."

For six centuries it was the yearly pride of Venice to sweep out to sea in the golden Bucentaur, and with a ring, to wed the queenly Adriatic. But the glory of Venice was not perennial. The progress of civilization, the retaking of Constantinople by the Mussulmen, the jealousy of nations, the discovery of the passage to the Indies by Cape Horn, the awful cruelty that lurked in her dark recesses—all conspired together to rob her of her commerce and her possessions, while the battle drums of Napoleon's conquering march announced the closing scene of her independence. Long since she has ceased to be consulted, when the great treaties of Europe are made, and in place of the proud winged Lion until recently might have been seen the standard of Austria. Her palaces are crumbling ; the voice of music and of merriment is scarce heard ; her pageants have vanished ; her decline is still steep ; she is visibly dying—"but beauty still is here." The happy climate, the portly site, and the queenly sea, are all unchanged. The permanence of nature and the decay of art stand hand in hand, to tell the melancholy story of the world, and her history still is dear.

"But unto us she hath a spell beyond
 Her name in story, and her long array
 Of mighty shadows, whose dim forms despised
 Above the Dogeless city's vanished sway.
 Our's is a trophy which will not decay
 With the Rialto ; SHYLOCK, and the Moor,
 And Pierre, cannot be swept or worn away—
 The Keystone of the arch ! Though all were o'er,
 For us re peopled were the solitary shore."

But to "re-people" such a place must of necessity be a great attempt, and in the execution of it the great dramatist has produced, along with another, *The Merchant of Venice*. (This play, among the dramas of Shakespeare is remarkable, and among his comedies stands pre-eminent. Notwithstanding the vicissitudes of taste which occur in the progress of time, this comedy has come down to us through more than two and a half centuries, without losing one whit of admiration. Its merits are genuine ; it contains the eternal principles of truth and beauty, which change not ; after the long time intervening since its production, it still remains a model play of the present stage, even above its sister comedies.)

The subject of the *Merchant of Venice* may be stated—the folly of avarice and the reward of self-sacrifice. This is taught with the clearness and force of a dissertation, and yet not at all at the expense of the ease and lively interest of the action of the play. Nor do we find irrelevant parts, introduced only for poetical effect ; but there is in the play that happy adaptation of a varied and interesting plot to a

definite point, which is the production of great genius only. There is comprised in it the substance of two plays. The story of Shylock and his bond is by some narrated as of actual occurrence, and was, long before Shakespeare, dramatized under the title of *The Jew*. The story of the Three Caskets was early popular at Venice, and acted, it is thought, in some form, as early as A. D. 800. It is the connection of these two distinct stories, which forms the principal objection against the UNITY of the play. With this, or, more properly, as a part of it, there is an objection made to the introduction of the whole of the fifth act, that the plot closed with the fourth act. Besides these, we know of no objections ever made, nor of the possibility of any being made, to anything as destroying the unity of the play.

As to the first, it seems to us that these critics have a mistaken idea of the unity of a drama. It should be remembered that a drama is written for the stage. It is not the primary consideration of the dramatist to teach, but to amuse. Beyond all doubt, Shakespeare wrote "to fill the Globe Theatre." We do not, therefore, look for that strict relevancy in the *Merchant of Venice*, which we could require in a discourse on the folly of avarice and the reward of self-sacrifice. The *intrigue* of the play, as it is styled by Dr. Blair, may be a little more digressive than the argument of a dissertation. If there be any part which might as well be omitted, or that will suspend and divide the atten-

tion from the principal action of the play, it must be noted as a serious fault; but if such part, although digressive from the main plot, is rendered subservient to it, it is not only admissible, but a mark of great merit. How then, it may be asked, is the story of the Three Caskets related to the story of Shylock and the Merchant? We presume it would be a sufficient answer to one so inquiring, to ask him to bring his thoughts to bear upon the play, without the story of the Caskets, and give candid judgment whether it would not lose in the event. But more than this. An audience in a theatre would demand an adequate cause for the urgency displayed by Antonio in obtaining the three thousand ducats. In a drama, it would be harsh and unpleasant without it. And surely no one would pretend to account for it better than by the peculiar circumstances of Bassanio's courtship, which Shakespeare has chosen. This, together with the important part which Portia is made to take in the trial scene, knits the two parts so closely together, that the one would be incomplete without the other. It is not the UNITY, but the SIMPLICITY, of the play that is affected by the introduction of the part relative to the Caskets; and the standard taste has long ago decided that the greater variety of events admitted into our drama is an improvement on the ancient custom.

There is also satisfactory reason for not closing with the fourth act, as some would prefer. The fourth act closes with a gloomy impression on the mind. Poor

Shylock quits the Rialto, humiliated, bereft of his daughter and his fortune, and frustrated in his earnest design of vengeance on Antonio for the wrongs he and his race had suffered. John Bunyan has been severely criticised for closing his famous work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, with a solemn sentiment. If this be open to criticism in a work like Bunyan's, how would it be tolerated in a drama, the primary design of which is amusement? (Besides, the fifth act is brief and of "exhilarating mirth," calculated to dissipate any feeling of sadness, and still sufficiently connected with the main plot to lead the mind on in the same channel.)

The action of this play is also complete. Not only does it contain nothing superfluous, but it is entire, like a clear thought expressed in a full rounded period. *The Merchant of Venice* is a play in which the critic can long detain himself, admiring, studying, wondering. We call it a comedy; but when we follow the action of the first four acts, studying the dark designs of the Jew, and enter the fatal Rialto with him, we feel that we are amid the very elements of tragedy. While the exhibition of those lighter feelings which are calculated to produce mirth, the essence of comedy, is no way neglected, there is a degree of earnestness pervading the whole, and rising above every other feature, which gives it a decided tragic character. It is a mistaken idea, that death is essential to tragedy. We quote Schlegel on this point, as a standard writer on dramatic literature. He says: "Earnestness in

the highest degree is the essence of the tragic tone ; the essence of the comic is mirth." In the very first act of the Merchant of Venice, there is an exhibition of those emotions which are fatal and tragic in their character—hatred, revenge, avarice. When the principal actor is first introduced, in an "aside" remark he gives us a key to all his subsequent action :

"How like a fawning publican he looks !
I hate him, for he is a Christian."

The precarious bargain of the three thousand ducats, into the motives of which the reader is allowed to see, progresses and is concluded. This alone suffices to instil into the heart of the reader deep anxiety. By this time some of the fearful scenes of retributive justice have begun, which, in the natural course of events, follow the wicked even in this world. First, Shylock's servant, Launcelot, becomes unfaithful in the service of his master, and is willing to enter into a conspiracy against him. And now follows the revolt of blood ; the daughter of a wealthy Hebrew denounces her home and her father, takes money from his coffers, and plans and executes a clandestine marriage with a Gentile. In all this the tragic element predominates, and in the effect upon Shylock rises to a display of grandeur in the author's genius. (None but Shakespeare could so have represented outbursts of passions with all the peculiarities of the person in whom it is exhibited :)

"I never heard a passion so confused,
 So strange, outrageous, and so variable,
 As the dog Jew did utter in the streets :
 My daughter ! O my ducats ! O my daughter !
 Fled with a Christian ! O my Christian ducats !
 Justice ! the law ! my ducats and my daughter !"

But now a day begins to dawn in the revengeful bosom of the Jew. One after another the tidings come of the wrecks of Antonio's ships. The day upon which the bond falls due approaches—is here—passes, and the bond unpaid ! The pound of flesh is forfeit—the Jew's revenge secure ! We are hurried before the Duke, and here follows a scene which challenges description. Shylock turns a deaf ear to every advice or plea, nor will be satisfied with any thing but revenge, still justifying himself with the *lex talionis*. Again, the last appeal is made to him to abstain from cruelty, but to all he answers only—

("By my soul I swear,
 There is no power in the tongue of man
 To alter me : I stay here on my bond.")

The very balance in which "to weigh the flesh" is ready ; no surgeon is allowed near "to stop the wounds," for it is not "so nominated in the bond ;" and the very acme of inhumanity is attained in these two lines :

Bassanio. Why dost thou wet thy knife so earnestly ?
Shylock. To cut the forfeiture from that bankrupt there."

This, then, with the unhappy fate which follows Shylock, constitutes tragedy in the highest degree.

But through all this earlier part of the play, there is running, gracefully combined with the tragic, the comedy of Portia's strange courtship, by means of the Three Caskets. The characteristic suit of her different wooers; the philosophical connection between the pompous speech of the Prince of Morocco, the vain conceited display of the Prince of Arragon, and their respective choices, and the effect it has upon them; the hesitancy on the part of both Portia and Bassanio, as they stand waiting on the fateful choice; the air of simple sweetness thrown around Jessica; the episode of unique Launcelot, of whom Jessica gives a rather strong, but expressive description—

“Our house is hell, and thou, a merry devil,
Did'st rob it of some taste of tediousness”—

all these are touches of the highest dramatic art in the department of comedy. But after the trial is concluded in accordance with our wishes, and at the same time exemplifying the great law of sequence in the moral world—rewards for good, punishment for evil—it is then that Shakespeare undertakes what few poets have undertaken and fewer still succeeded in performing. It is to represent, in a somewhat protracted scene, a picture of happiness. (There are dangers here pressing the poet from every side: the danger of becoming stiff and unnatural, at all times great in composing a drama, but especially so in a case like this; the danger of becoming weak, and thus making a)

sickly scene ; and greater than these is the want of appropriate material, with which to sustain it for any time. But the effect of the fifth act of the Merchant of Venice is grand. (In the beginning one can imagine himself in some romantic situation, and a little further on, all the charms of a pleasant night seem to be compressed into one line :

“How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank.”

A critic might fain be lavish with his praises here, but to name the respective beauties were more difficult.

Now we do not know what judgment an Academy, prescribing rules, would pass upon such a combination of the tragic and the comic ; but it would certainly be a very liberal institution of the kind, that would not condemn it in the abstract, as not being in accordance with simplicity, or harmony of feeling, or as violating one or other of its thousand rules. (But we know of no rules prescribed by any school, in which genius could mould its productions with grander effect, than the Merchant of Venice. | This feature should then be regarded rather as an additional mark of originality and greatness, than as a defect.

Another point, on which critics of the drama lay perhaps more stress than any other, is naturalness. Naturalness in a play is observed in two respects. First in the sequence of events, and second in the action of individual character. In respect to the first, it may be said of the play in question, as a whole,

what can be said of Shakespeare's works in general. Of these Hazlitt says : ("He may be said to have created an imaginary world of his own, which possesses all the appearance and the truth of reality.") Perhaps the best proof of this is, that the facts and characters of history are as pliable to his genius as the creatures of his own fancy. We might instance the two tragedies King Richard Third and Macbeth—the one well authenticated history, the other legendary. Yet they are similar in many respects, and both have the semblance of truth. This is of course meant in a restricted sense, since witches and ghosts are not now as popular as they were then. But we cannot stop to argue this point ; the reputation universally accorded to Shakespeare is sufficient to sustain it.

We will, however, venture to question one feature of the Merchant of Venice with respect to this. It is the part which Portia takes in the trial. However good this may be in itself, and however necessary to firmly knitting together the two stories, and although there are some things to make it appear plausible, it has always appeared to us to border hard on the improbable. It is true that her allusion to the learned Doctor Bellarrio as her cousin, may lead us to infer that she enjoyed his instruction for the occasion, and this, and her high rank and intelligence, serve to render her remarkable management of the case more probable ; but even these seem too weak to balance the improbabilities. That a woman, not even living

directly under the Venetian law, should in the course of a few days prepare and go, a stranger, to the court of Venice, and there, before her husband and friend, unrecognized, take in charge and carry through with success a case which, in spite of the learning of the Duke, was going contrary to law and justice—this seems hardly compatible with our observations on the actions of men anywhere.

As to the naturalness in the action of individual character. In this connection we may also treat of other characteristics of the actors. (This, of course, begins with Shylock, who, as Schlegel says, “is one of those inconceivable masterpieces of characterization of which Shakespeare alone furnishes us with examples.”) Another writer has observed that Shylock alone would have gained an immortality for Shakespeare, and so has always and everywhere been justly celebrated. Nevertheless, it is not a new question, whether he is not a caricature? In consideration of this we must have regard to the circumstances in which we see him. From his first entrance to the scene, where he is asked to lend money to Antonio, whom of all men he perhaps hates most, to his final exit from the court, with defeat resting heavy upon his head, we never see him except as affected by strong passions—hate, avarice and revenge. In such a case, then, we rarely look for a display of a man’s best qualities. If we saw him in a state of quietude we would expect him to speak and act differently. As it

is, we find him in a state in which the national characteristics are likely to appear most strongly marked ; and so we find him a Jew in everything he says or does. As Schlegel has well remarked, “we imagine we hear a sprinkling of the Jewish pronunciation in the mere written words, as we sometimes still find it in the higher classes, notwithstanding their social refinement.” We cannot think, as some do, either that the feeling of revenge exhibited is unnaturally strong, or that it is incompatible with his avaricious spirit. For we not unfrequently find these two passions in a high degree in the same person. They are not contradictory. Besides, in this case, the shrewd Shylock might well have calculated that if he could remove Antonio from the market, who was wont to “lend out money gratis and bring down the usance in Venice,” he would effect more for himself than if he accepted “thrice the three thousand ducats.” And the humiliation and wrongs, he and his nation had suffered from the Christians, are not altogether insufficient to raise a man of his description to the highest pitch of passion. He pleads his own case best :

“He hath disgraced me, and hindered me of half a million ; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies ; and what’s his reason ? I am a Jew.”

We have only space to notice a few of the fine delineations of Shylock’s character. While Bassanio is contracting with him for the three thousand ducats,

how the repetition of a part of Bassanio's last sentence reveals the avaricious man, deeply engaged in thoughts of dark design ! Called to better attention by an unexpected question, confusedly he bursts out, "Oh, no, no, no, no !" and is ready with excuses, at the same time insinuating his own designs. He justifies himself in his actions against "the fool that lent out money gratis," and still discloses the characteristics of his own race, by reference to their own scriptures. Finding Antonio almost necessarily "beholden" to him, he takes advantage of his situation, commencing "Signior Antonio," to tantalize him ; and his speech becomes more confident. We must pass over his anxiety about his money and his daughter's seclusion, on going to the Gentile's feast ; his pitiable condition on being deprived of his daughter and his jewels ; the strange tempest of his passions as they are tossed high and low by the alternating news of the wrecks of Antonio's ships, his child's faithlessness, and the scene before the gaoler. These in themselves are sufficient to give long study to the critic or psychologist. In the trial too, his tenacity of purpose, his continued self-justification, sometimes his original thought, his praising the Duke and Portia for anything favorable to himself, his disavowal of mercy and kindness, and his adherence to justice according to the letter of the law, are all strictly Jewish, and brought out with the powerful effect known only in Shakespeare ; but more than all, his ungraceful defeat, reverses coming upon him one after

another, like heavy strokes of fate, sickening him even of life, until he leaves the court in the cursed track of all his tribe, of whom it was long ago said, "Thou shalt become an astonishment, a proverb, a by-word, among all nations whither the Lord shall lead thee."

Antonio, from whom the play is named, is a "royal merchant" of Venice, in whom are blended many beautiful traits of character, so as to win our admiration, and our most sincere sympathy in his reverses. In this description he stands out the more strikingly by the side of Shylock, with whom he is naturally contrasted. The one "lends out money gratis" to his friends and to others; the other makes his money "breed" as fast as the sheep in the scriptural illustration which he adduces. The one has around him a large retinue of devoted friends; the other commands not even the love of his daughter or the attachment of his servant. The one recognizes mercy and good-will in all his actions towards his fellow men, as especially appears in his conduct toward the Jew after he had won his case at court; the other knows nothing but self-interest, justice according to the strictest human laws, and revenge. Yet Antonio, according to our method of judging, is not a perfect character. Whatever the regard in which the Venetians held them, the charges which Shylock makes against him have weight with us :

"Signior Antonio, many a time and oft,

In the Rialto you have rated me

About my monies and my usuances ;
 Still have I borne it with a patient shrug ;
 For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
 You call me misbeliever, cut-throat, dog,
 And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,
 And all for use of that which is mine own."

The disposition of Antonio is of that melancholy kind which is ruffled neither in adversity nor in prosperity. The unhappy news of his vessels, the forfeiture of his bond, and even death staring him in the face, could not cause in him terror or excitement, or the expression of intense hatred of the Jew ; while the romance and the music of the fifth act are alike ineffectual to rouse him from his gentle, even temperament.

Launcelot is one of those rare characters, which few poets have successfully depicted. He carries an air of humor and pleasantness about him. He is perfectly *sui generis* in all his actions. Of his conversation it may be said with truth, that you would recognize the actor in it wherever it were found, thus proving the unexampled versatility of the author. Such characters are frequently introduced only for theatrical effect ; but Shakespeare makes his action subservient to the action of the play, developing the grand law of natural retribution, and aiding in the episode of Jessica. Nor does he take away from the dignity of the play or the dignity of the other actors.

Portia is one of those productions of genius, which bear the stamp of supreme greatness, but are not free from marks of imperfection. This is true, whether

she be considered in respect to the clearness in which she is drawn, or as an ideal of womanly character. As a character distinctly drawn, we cannot long enough dwell upon her conduct previous to the trial, and especially the manner in which she treats the suit of her three wooers—playing the coquette with the first two, but betraying her feelings when Bassanio is about to choose, although she says, “but it is not love,” as also her part in the last act. In the trial, beside her action being a little unnatural in the sequence of events, she is made to assume a dignity of which we would never have considered her capable. She acts her part so well, that it would have been an achievement for any other author to make the young Doctor from Rome himself act so naturally. Mrs. Jameson says that all this would appear forced and unnatural in any other woman, but natural in Portia. Now even if this be true, the difficulty is but put back one step farther; for in that case she would be an unnatural woman, a forced character throughout. In respect to her womanly qualities, so many varying opinions have been expressed by learned men and women, that it is presumption to pronounce her perfect or not so. Here are arrayed on one side the panegyrics of Mrs. Jameson, Clarke and others, against the direct rejection or neglect of Schlegel, Hazlitt and Richardson. Perhaps neither side is altogether wrong. She certainly possesses some ideal qualities. Her remarkable intelligence, united with vivid imagination, makes her

conversation of a most delightful character. We discover at once her high rank, her native wit and talent, and her excellent training. Beside this, she is endowed with a most generous and lovely disposition, which directs her otherwise only admirable action, so as to become the most considerate and pleasing conduct. Her speech to Shylock, commending mercy, is a specimen of "almost heavenly eloquence," while in all her conduct toward Bassanio there predominate marks of warm affection and tenderness of heart. Before the choice, her conversation is frank and modest, and pervaded by a buoyant spirit. In her peculiar position, as Mrs. Jameson well expresses it, "the conflict between love and fear and maidenly dignity, cause the most delicious confusion that ever tinged a woman's cheek, or dropped in broken utterance from her lips"—

"I pray you, tarry : pause a day or two
Before you hazard ; for, in choosing wrong
I lose your company."

After the choice has been successfully made, she culminates in womanly loveliness, in her tender resignation of herself, with all her possessions, to her future husband—

"You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am. * * * * *
Myself and what is mine to you and yours
Is now converted ; but now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself ; and even now : but now
This house, these servants, and this same myself,
Are yours, my lord."

On the other hand, we cannot blame any one for finding fault with other features. Her slight duplicity with two of her wooers, her forwardness on several occasions, and the not too chaste episode of the ring, may indeed be incompatible with the ideal of some.

Portia's waiting woman, Nerissa, is but a dim, diminutive reflection of Portia herself.

Jessica is indeed—

“A most beautiful Pagan—a most sweet Jew.”

We forgive her running away from her father, we scarce know why. She carries an air of pleasantness about her, that is bewitching. The dialogue in the moonlight, “on such a night as this,” is enchanting. It contains elements of the best poetry. There is in Jessica's character a tinge of orientalism that adds beauty to her. She would indeed herself be worthy of being the principal character of a play.

(There are other actors in this play, which is peculiarly rich in highly finished characters, who are worthy of attention. Like the creatures of nature, each in his part answers the purpose of his creation. Those whom we have mentioned stand out in bolder relief, like the principal figures of a picture, while the others fill up the back ground in beautiful symmetry.

A secondary object in the drama, but one which should never be lost sight of, is the teaching of moral lessons. In this Shakespeare excels; but he sometimes forgets, and flatters the prejudices of his hearers.

Frequently this can be explained by his tenacious adherence to truth. In the Merchant of Venice, the general lesson taught is one of great truth and force, and cannot but strike the reader. Few plays are so replete with incidental truths as this. The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It, Hamlet, and Julius Cæsar, contain more passages which have become a part of our daily speech, and taken root in the popular mind, than any others in Shakespeare. Yet our play is not free from questionable sentiment. We see no reason to commend the elopement of Jessica, yet she is held up in a light, that we cannot but admire her. Again, whatever may be the character of the Jew, we could never endorse such conduct as he suffers at the hands of Antonio. Antonio says :

“I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.”

Yet Antonio is afterwards represented as the favorite of all Venice, and thus supposed to draw our admiration too. Doubtless these things were strictly true in Venice, where a Jew was held in such different estimation.

(The language of Shakespeare is a subject of great interest, but would itself furnish material for a volume. Shakespeare vastly increased the capacity of the English language. In his time,

“The imagination bodied forth
The forms of things unknown ; the poet’s pen
Turn’d them to shapes, and gave to airy nothing
A local habitation, and a name.”)

Perhaps the most remarkable fact in this connection is, that he adapts the language, so far as possible, to the person, time and place. In the Merchant of Venice, for instance, the language which Portia, whom it is better to regard in this act as the young Doctor from Rome, uses in the trial, at once designates her a stranger. The percentage of Saxon words, in her speech, is a little smaller, and such phrases as "the Venetian law," are different from the rest. The language of Shylock, before referred to, and that of Launcelot, also furnish good illustrations. • The Merchant of Venice, as well as all his plays representing scenes in Southern Europe, contains more words of Latin origin than the others. The names of the characters in the Merchant of Venice, Antonio, Bassanio, Lorenzo, Launcelot, Gobbo, Leonardo, &c., are all old and familiar names at Venice. Yet all these characteristics seem to radiate from the one great wonder of Shakespeare—his power of representing nature and truth. His works are the noblest execution of his own purpose, "whose end," he says, "both at first, and now, was, and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature ; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."

